



Market Research

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Mexican Health Tourism to the United States

Health tourism is a relatively new sector that is expected to become an important niche market. Health tourism is comprised of two sub-markets—medical (or healthcare) tourism and wellness tourism. The United States possesses some of the most sophisticated medical facilities worldwide and can definitely compete to attract Mexican travelers.

Occasionally, U.S. tourism destinations and service providers underestimate the importance of the Mexican travel and tourism market, but it is the second source of travelers to the United States just behind Canada. During 2004, spending by Mexican travelers totaled \$6.5 billion, with almost 85% of this amount spent by air travelers. This figure shows the economic importance of Mexican air travelers.

As such, there is an important percentage of wealthy Mexicans who demand quality medical and health services. Every year, thousands of Mexicans travel to the United States looking for medical diagnosis, consultation, and surgery services. Some of the most important destinations in the United States for Mexicans who look for such medical services include Houston, Miami, San Antonio, and Los Angeles. Cities with direct flights from Mexico are particularly well suited to capitalize on health / medical tourism.

The city of San Antonio has realized the potential of the Mexican medical tourism market and has jointly created with one of the top airlines in Mexico, and one of the most important medical groups in San Antonio, the first health tourism package for Mexicans to the United States. The package includes the usual elements of a tourist package, such as air transportation and lodging, but features access to a wide range of medical services, from physical examination to specialized medical attention provided in one of the hospitals associated to the program. The package can also add trips and entrances to the city attractions and shopping malls.

Usually, most of the Mexicans who travel to the United States for medical reasons need for check-ups, with a smaller percentage requiring a surgery. Mexican medical tourists travel with their families and plan additional activities during their trip, like entertainment and shopping. The average stay of a Mexican medical traveler is two days, but can spend more in order to visit local attractions and do shopping. It should be noted that these visitors are frequent travelers to the United States and often extend their stay for other purposes.

Even though there is increasing competition for medical tourism services offered by developing countries such as India and South Asian nations, the Mexicans who travel to the United States are looking for quality services and can definitely afford them. For example, according to the participant airline of the medical package mentioned above, every year 120,000 Mexicans travel to San Antonio due to medical reasons. The actual number is probably higher.

Wellness tourism involves helping healthy people prevent problems so they stay well, both physically and mentally. In the case of wellness tourism, spas for healthy people currently represent most important area in which the United States can focus to attract the Mexican health market.

In terms of health tourism in the U.S., the important types of spas are:

- Resort/hotel spas, which are located within a resort or hotel and provide spa services, fitness and wellness components, and some spa cuisine menu choices.
- Destination spas where the sole purpose is to provide guests with lifestyle improvement and health enhancement through spa services, physical fitness, a spa cuisine menu, educational programming, and on-site accommodations.

To maintain a competitive advantage, spas, hotels, and resorts are adding "alternative" therapies and approaches to the services they offer. Some hotel/resort spas also offer physical and mental wellness activities such as yoga, meditation, reflexology, and water-based therapies. Cruise lines also have responded to consumer interest in health and fitness. Today virtually every large cruise ship has a spa, fitness center, and healthy-eating choices on their menus. These services can be very attractive to the Mexican tourism.

In fact, a new generation of young Mexican executives and the wealthy population are looking for destinations that can offer golf activities, spas, fitness centers and healthy alternatives. Destinations that offer golf activities and spa services attract Mexicans, such as: California, Arizona, Texas, and Florida, among others. Additionally, Mexicans flock to cruises. Every year, thousands of Mexicans board cruises, which depart from famous destinations in Florida and the Pacific Ocean.

U.S. health tourism services providers should consider that Mexicans are family oriented. Therefore, in order to tap into this important market, U.S. health tourism companies must work with other services providers to offer additional family and shopping activities in order to get the attention of the Mexican traveler. Mexican domestic destinations provide the stiffest competition to the U.S. wellness industry. Many Mexican cities, resorts, and hotels are expanding into this lucrative market as well.

Other U.S. tourism and medical destinations cannot lose the opportunity to tap into this lucrative market. For more information on the Mexican travel and tourism market please contact Juan Carlos Ruiz, Commercial Assistant.

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